Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

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PAGE 01 STATE 204661

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EXDIS

FOR AMB LODGE PERSONAL EYES ONLY FROM AMB MARTIN

FOL REPEAT SAIGON 12026 SENT ACTION SECSTATE SEP 16, 1974

QUOTE

S E C R E T SAIGON 12026

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: XGDS 1, DECLAS 9/16/85
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SUBJ: OPPOSITION POLITICAL ACTIVITY SEEKS TO EXPLOIT STRAINS IN THE BODY POLITIC

REF: (A) SAIGON 11859; (B) STATE 198879

1. SEVERAL IMPORTANT FACTORS ARE PRESENTLY CREATING POLITICAL PRESSURES WITHIN VIETNAMESE BODY POLITIC. EMB BELIEVES MOST CURRENT ACTIVITY REFLECTS BOTH OPPOSITION AND PRO-GOVERNMENT ELEMENTS EITHER REACTING TO OR ATTEMPTING TO EXPLOIT THESE PRESSURES IN EFFORTS IMPROVE THEIR POSITIONS IN ADVANCE OF
SECRET

PAGE 02 STATE 204661

1975 LOWER HOUSE AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS. THIS MESSAGE WILL DISCUSS RECENT SEPARATE BUT INTERRELATED DEVELOPMENTS IN FIELDS OF ANTI-CORRUPTION, PRESS FREEDOM, AND BUDDHIST POLITICAL ACTIVITY.

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

2. MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS CURRENTLY HEATING UP SVN POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE ARE:

-- CONTINUING INFLATION AND FALLING LEVELS REAL INCOME. WHILE CONTINUING HOSTILITIES AND WORLDWIDE INFLATION UNDERSTOOD AS PARTIAL CAUSE OF VIETNAMESE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS, WITHDRAWAL OF US FORCES AND CONGRESSIONAL ACTION RESULTING IN FALLING US AID LEVELS ARE ALSO SEEN AS CAUSE, AND THIS PLACES VN ECONOMIC WOES AT LEAST PARTIALLY IN PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF WHAT IS SEEN BY SOME AS FALTERING US SUPPORT;

-- RESIGNATION OF PRESIDENT NIXON. WHILE CONTINUING SUPPORT OF GVN BY ADMINISTRATION OF PRESIDENT FORD GENERALLY APPRECIATED, DRAMATIC IMPEACHMENT CRISIS AND RESIGNATION OF PRESIDENT NIXON HAD TRAUMATIC EFFECT IN VIETNAM LEAVING INEVITABLE NERVOUSNESS AND UNCERTAINTY IN ITS WAKE. THIS HAS BEEN GREATLY EXACERBATED BY REDUCED LEVELS OF MILITARY ASSISTANCE.

-- THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN INCREASED OPPOSITION ACTIVITY BEGINNING NOW IN ANY CASE BECAUSE OF NEXT YEAR'S ELECTION. TEMP HAS BEEN ACCELERATED BY FOREGOING TWO FACTORS BOTH OF WHICH HAVE WEAKENED THE POSITION OF PRESIDENT THIEU AND HIS ADMINISTRATION IN THE EYES OF THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION.

3. IT IS IN THIS ATMOSPHERE THAT POLITICIANS ARE BEGINNING TO LOOK AHEAD TO THE 1975 ELECTIONS. THERE IS A WIDESPREAD THOUGH HIGHLY UNSPECIFIC PERCEPTION THAT SOME SORT OF CHANGE IS LIKELY IN FORESEEABLE FUTURE. WHILE PROBABLY FEW POLITICAL LEADERS SEE LIKELIHOOD OF DEFEATING PRESIDENT THIEU AT THE POLLS, SOME DO SEE POSSIBILITY OF POLITICAL ADVANTAGE TO THEMSELVES IN COMING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN WHICH THIEU WILL FEEL UNDER STRONG PRESSURE TO AVOID REPETITION OF 1971 UNCONTESTED ELECTION.

4. ANTI-CORRUPTION HAS FOR YEARS BEEN A POPULAR CAUSE. IN CASE OF FATHER TRAN HUU THANH'S PEOPLE'S ANTI-CORRUPTION

MOVEMENT (PACM), SIGNATURES OF MANY PRIESTS WERE COLLECTED ON AN ANTI-CORRUPTION MANIFESTO (301 WERE CLAIMED), APPARENTLY WITHOUT OBJECTION FROM CHURCH LEADERSHIP. ON AUGUST 18 THE PACM WAS FORMALLY INAUGURATED, AND SOON THE CATHOLIC PAPER HOA BINH WAS SUPPORTING THANH, AS WAS DEPUTY NGUYEN VAN BINH, CATHOLIC OPPOSITION LEADER WITH A PREVIOUSLY NON-RADICAL REPUTATION.

5. MANY OBSERVERS BELIEVED THE CATHOLIC LEADERSHIP WAS DELIBERATELY NOT HINDERING PACM IN ORDER ALLOW IMPRESSION TO DEVELOP CATHOLIC CHURCH WAS ONCE AGAIN DEFINING A POSITION FOR ITSELF AT SOME DISTANCE FROM THE ADMINISTRATION. THIS IMPRESSION DID, IN FACT, BECOME WIDESPREAD AMONG SAIGON POLITICAL

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

LEADERS. CATHOLICS WERE APPARENTLY KEEPING OPTIONS OPEN AGAINST POSSIBILITY OF POLITICAL CHANGES.

6. SUBSEQUENT UPSURGE OF PUBLICITY AND RADICALIZATION OF MOVEMENT WERE PROBABLY NOT DESIRED BY CATHOLIC LEADERSHIP. SEVERAL PROMINENT CATHOLIC LAYMENT HAVE SAID CORRUPTION CHARGES AGAINST PRESIDENT THIEU WENT MUCH TOO FAR. PUBLICLY, CHURCH HIERARCHY HAS BEEN TOTALLY SILENT. IN FACT, ARCHBISHOP BINH LEFT SAIGON A FEW DAYS AGO FOR SOLITUDE OF LONG HAI NEAR VUNG TAU. CATHOLIC HIERARCHY IS FACED WITH DIFFICULT PROBLEM. THEY OF COURSE CANNOT BE AGAINST ANTI-CORRUPTION; HOWEVER, AS REPORTED REF (A), CHARGES MADE BY FATHER THANH IN HUE ARE HIGHLY SENSATIONAL AND IT IS QUESTIONABLE ANY WILL BE SUB-STANTIATED. TO AVOID CONFRONTATION WITH THIEU, SOME CHURCH LEADERS ARE MOVING TO HALT PACM ACTIVISM IN THEIR AREAS, NOTABLY QUI NHON BISHOP CAC, WHO DISTURBED BY SEPTEMBER 8 EVENTS IN HUE, HAS ORDERED THERE BE NO ANTI-CORRUPTION DEMONSTRATION IN QUI NHON OR QUANG NGAI AND BISHOP CHI OF DANANG WHO TOLD CONGEN HE OPPOSES PACM DEMONSTRATION IN THAT CITY.

7. SIMILAR SCENARIO ATTENDED DEVELOPMENT PRESS FREEDOM CAMPAIGN. FATHER THANH LANG AND COLLEAGUES IN VN PEN CLUB HAVE LONG BEEN CONCERNED WITH WHAT THEY BELIEVED TO BE ARBI-TRARY IMPLEMENTATION OF PRESS CONTROLS ON AUTHORS. EMB HAS RECEIVED CONSIDERABLE COMMENT, TO EFFECT HOANG DUC NHA'S STAFF HAS IN PAST IMPLEMENTED LAW IN ARBITRARY MANNER. SUCH IRRI-TATIONS WERE EXACERBATED BY RISING NEWSPRINT COSTS AND GENER-ALLY POOR ECONOMIC SITUATION OF PRESS AND PUBLISHING INDUSTRY.
SECRET

PRESS DISPUTE WITH MININFO NHA, SIMMERING FOR OVER YEAR, SURFACED WITH PUBLIC COMPLAINTS BY LANG OVER DELAYS AND ARBI-TRARINESS ENCOUNTERED IN OBTAINING PERMISSION PUBLISH BOOKS. THIS QUICKLY ESCALATED TO PROTESTS TO WORLD PEN CLUB, FORMA-TION STRUGGLE COMMITTEE AND, FINALLY, SYMBOLIC BURNING PRESS LAWS 007/72 AND 19/69; THESE BEING THE LEGAL FOUNDATION FOR PRESS CENSORSHIP IN VIETNAM. THESE DEVELOPMENTS ACCOMPANIED BY INCREASING PARTICIPATION CATHOLIC ELEMENTS; PROBABLY FOR SOME REASONS ATTRIBUTED CATHOLIC SUPPORT OF ANTI-CORRUPTION MOVEMENT. SEVERAL LOWER HOUSE CATHOLIC DEPUTIES BECAME ACTIVE IN MOVEMENT. FATHER THANH'S PACM ASSOCIATED ITSELF WITH PRESS FREEDOM FIGHT. CATHOLIC OPPOSITIONIST SENATOR DAT CAME OUT FOR ABOLITION OF 007. CATHOLIC PAPER HOA BINH TEMPORARILY CLOSED ITS DOORS IN PROTEST AGAINST CENSORSHIP. AGAIN, HOW-EVER, WHILE CATHOLIC LEADERSHIP REMAINED SILENT, IT SEEMS MOST UNLIKELY THAT IT WOULD SUPPORT RADICALS' DEMAND FOR COMPLETE ABOLITION OF CENSORSHIP.

8. BOTH ANTI-CORRUPTION AND PRESS FREEDWOM CAMPAIGNS HAVE REMAINED ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY CATHOLIC IN ORIENTATION. SOME REVOLUTIONARY DAI VIET PARTICIPATED IN HUE DEMONSTRATIONS (NOT BUDDHISTS AS REPORTED AFP STORY QUOTED REF (B) AND DEPUTY

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

TRAN VAN TUYEN (NON-CATHOLIC AND SOUTHERN VNQDD) HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN PRESS FREEDOM CAMPAIGN BUT, SO FAR, THESE ARE EXCEPTIONS. WE DOUBT THAT BUDDHISTS WILL JOIN EITHER CAMPAIGN OF CATHOLIC OPPOSITION.

9. DEVELOPMENT OF "NATIONAL RECONCILIATION FORCE" (NRF) IS ATTEMPT BY BUDDHIST SENATOR VU VAN MAU TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SITUATION. MAU HAS TOLD US THAT NRF IS NOT A PARTY BUT A "FORCE FOR PEACE". HE CLAIMS TO HAVE BACKING OF BUDDHIST HIGH SECULAR COUNCIL, VIEN HOA DAO (VHD), AND SAYS NRF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE IN PROVINCES WILL PARALLEL THAT OF BUDDHIST CHURCH. NRF WILL NOT SUBMIT ITSELF TO POLITICAL PARTY LAW 060, BUT MAU TEMPORIZES WHEN ASKED WHETHER NRF WOULD FIELD CANDIDATES IN 1975 IF 060 LIBERALIZED. MAU'S VAGUENESS ARISES FROM CONTINUING SPLIT IN BUDDHIST RANKS OVER DEGREE OF ACTIVISM APPROPRIATE FOR BUDDHIST CHURCH. WHILE THICH TRI QUANG REPORTEDLY ACTIVELY BACKING MAU, FORMATION OF NRF (AND ORIGINAL ENDORSEMENT BY VHD) TOOK PLACE WHILE OPPONENTS OF BUDDHIST POLITICAL ACTIVISM, THICH THIEN MIEN AND THICH HUYNH QUANG,
SECRET

OUT OF COUNTRY AT BRUSSELS RELIGIOUS CONVENTION, AND WE HEAR THAT VHD ENDORSEMENT MADE ON BASIS ONLY 7-5 VOTE IN VHD WITH 6 MEMBERS ABSENT. THIEN MIEN AND HUYNH QUANG HAVE RETURNED, AND ALREADY PRESS REPORTS STEMMING FROM VHD HAVE BEGUN HEDGE ON NATURE BUDDHIST CHURCH'S COMMITMENT TO NRF.

10. TO DATE, WE SEE LITTLE PROSPECT OF NEW UNITY IN BUDDHIST MOVEMENT AS RESULT NRF AND BELIEVE IT VERY FAR FROM BEING EFFECTIVE POLITICAL FORCE. NRF HAS MADE CLEAR IT IS INTENDED AS BUDDHIST MOVEMENT AND THAT ITS FIRST GOAL IS BUDDHIST UNIFICATION. THUS, IT IS MAKING NO MOVE SUPPORT CATHOLIC INITIATIVES IN ANTI-CORRUPTION AND PRESS FREEDOM, AND BUDDHISTS HAVE TURNED DOWN AT LEAST TWO SPECIFIC INVITAIONS JOIN ANTI-CORRUPTION MOVEMENT.

11. IT SHOULD BE RECALLED THAT FOR THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS THE GVN HAS ACTUALLY BEEN MOVING SLOWLY IN THE DIRECTION NOW BEING VEHEMENTLY DEMANDED BY THE OPPOSITION. SOME FORM OF AMENDMENT TO THE PRESS LAW IS IN THE WORKS, AS IS PROBABLY SOME LIBERALIZATION OF THE LAW ON POLITICAL PARTIES. FURTHERMORE, THE GOVERNMENT HAS AT PRESIDENT THIEU'S ORDER STEPPED UP ITS ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN, PARTICULARLY IN THE MILITARY. (TW GENERALS AND 14 OTHER OFFICERS WERE CASHIERED SEPT 7 AS A RESULT.)
IN THE MEANTIME THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN EXTRAORDINARILY TOLERANT AND PRUDENT IN ITS HANDLING OF THE ACTIVISTS. INSTRUCTIONS HAVE GONE OUT TO THE POLICE TO USE MINIMAL FORCE, AND THAT ONLY WHEN ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY. FREE EXPRESSION OF VIEWS HAS BEEN PERMITTED THE CATHOLICS WHILE ON CHURCH PROPERTY. IN HUE THE ACTIVISTS BROADCAST FATHER THANH'S "INDICTMENT" OF PRESIDENT THIEU OVER THE CHURCH RADIO WITHOUT HINDRANCE. COPIES OF THE "INDICTMENT" ARE CIRCULATING FREELY IN SAIGON

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

AND ELSEWHERE; ONE NEWSPAPER HAS PRINTED THE CHARGES IN THE INDICTMENT, DELETING PRESIDENT THIEU'S NAME, WITHOUT OFFICIAL NOTICE. TWO DEPUTIES READ THE "INDICTMENT" TO THE PUBLIC FROM THE STEPS OF THE LOWER HOUSE, ALSO WITHOUT OFFICIAL REACTION. SO FAR AS WE KNOW, NO ARRESTS HAVE BEEN MADE OF ANY OF FATHER THANH'S FOLLOWERS OR OF ANY PERSONS INVOLVED IN DEMONSTRATIONS IN HUE OR ELSEWHERE.

12. NOT ONLY HAS THE GOVERNMENT SO FAR PERMITTED AN EXTRA-ORDINARY DEGREE OF PRESS FREEDOM WITH RESPECT TO THESE OPPO-
SECRET

SITION ACTIVITIES, IT HAS ALSO OPENED A DIALOGUE WITH PRESS REPRESENTATIVES ON THE SUBJECT OF PRESS LAW REFORM. PERSONS PRESENT AT A RECENT MEETING WITH THE PRESS ON THE SUBJECT PRESIDED OVER BY MINISTER OF INFORMATION NHA REPORT THAT NHA'S WHOLE APPROACH WAS CONCILIATORY AND THAT THE UPSHOT OF THE MEETING WAS THAT THE PRESS REPRESENTATIVES PRESENT WOULD FORM A COMMITTEE TO DRAW UP PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE PRESS LAW. THESE HAVE NOT YET BEEN PRESENTED TO THE MINISTRY.

13. ONE DANGER IN PRESENT SITUATION IS NUMBER OF WILD RUMORS WHICH RECENT EVENTS HAVE GENERATED. THESE TAKE TWO LINES: (1) THAT THE US IS CUTTING AID TO SVN TO COMPEL THE GVN EITHER TO "LIBERALIZE" ITSELF OR TO NEGOTIATE WITH THE COMMUNISTS OR (2) THAT THE US IS SECRETLY BACKING THE CURRENT OPPOSITION MOVEMENT PREPARATORY TO REPLACING PRESIDENT THIEU. THE COMMUNISTS THEMSELVES DEVELOPED THIS LATTER LINE IN THEIR WEEKLY SAIGON PRESS CONFERENCE SEPT 14. ("PRG" SPOKESMAN SAID US PREPARING TO DUMP PRESIDENT THIEU BECAUSE HE IS BECOMING MORE AND MORE ISOLATED AND PACIFICATION PROGRAM HAS FAILED. HISTORY SHOWS THIS TO BE FAVORITE AMERICAN TACTIC AS IN CASE OF PRESIDENT DIEM.) EMB IS OF COURSE TAKING EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO DENY THESE CANARDS AND STRESS WITH ALL EMPHASIS THE DETER-MINATION OF THE USG TO CONTINUE ITS POLICY OF STRONG SUPPORT FOR THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM.

14. WE EXPECT OPPOSITION ACTIVITY TO CONTINUE AT A FAIRLY HIGH TEMP FOR SOME TIME TO COME. GVN SOURCES TELL US FATHER THANH'S MOVEMENT PLANS SUCCESSIVE DEMONSTRATIONS IN HUE, DANANG, QUI NHON, BIEN HOA, SAIGON -- AND PERHAPS OTHER PLACES AS WELL. HOWEVER, AS WE HAVE NOTED, THANH IS BEGINNING TO ENCOUNTER OPPOSITION IN THE CHURCH AND HAS HAD ONLY LIMITED SUCCESS IN ATTRACTING OTHER POLITICAL GROUPS. NEITHER TRAN QUOC BUU NOR NGUYEN NGOC HUY OF THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE HAS SHOWN ANY INTEREST IN JOINING THE PRESENT AGITATION. LACKING BROAD CATHOLIC SUPPORT AND FAILING TO GAIN SUPPORT FROM OTHER OPPOSITION ELEMENTS, INCLUDING THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE AND THE BUDDHISTS, IT SEEMS UNLIKELY THAT FATHER THANH AND HIS MOVEMENT CAN BECOME A STRONG POLITICAL FORCE.

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

15. HOWEVER, THERE IS ALWAYS IN THESE SITUATIONS THE DANGER
SECRET

OF INCIDENTS DEVELOPING WHICH CAN CHANGE PUBLIC ATTITUDES QUICKLY, THUS TEMPTING MAJOR POLITICAL ELEMENTS TO INVOLVE THEMSELVES. HENCE MUCH DEPENDS ON THE GVN'S SUCCESSFULLY MAINTAINING ITS PRESENT POLICY OF TOLERATING FREE EXPRESSION WHILE CONTAINING DEMONSTRATIONS BY OPPOSITION GROUPS WITHOUT RESORT TO FORCE. MUCH WILL ALSO DEPEND ON THE POLITICAL SKILL WITH WHICH THE GVN PROCEEDS WITH ITS OWN CAMPAIGN TO REDUCE CORRUPTION AND WITH ITS PLANS FOR AMENDMENT OF THE PRESS AND POSSIBLY THE POLITICAL PARTY LAWS. LEHMANN

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